KASSAY Réka

MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI – WIM WENDERS: BEYOND THE CLOUDS
Analysis from the point of view of reflexivity

Abstract. The paper is an analysis of the movie *Al di là delle nuvole (Beyond the Clouds)* from the standpoint of reflexivity. Interpreting the relationship between Antonioni and Wenders, the aim of the research is to describe the language of film used in order to generate the self conscience of the author and its means to build the allegories of film(making). Dealing with direct and indirect reflexivity and the conscience of authorship for the work of the two directors, Kassay Réka uses the formal techniques of movie production in order to explain the emotional and aesthetic consequences of such techniques.

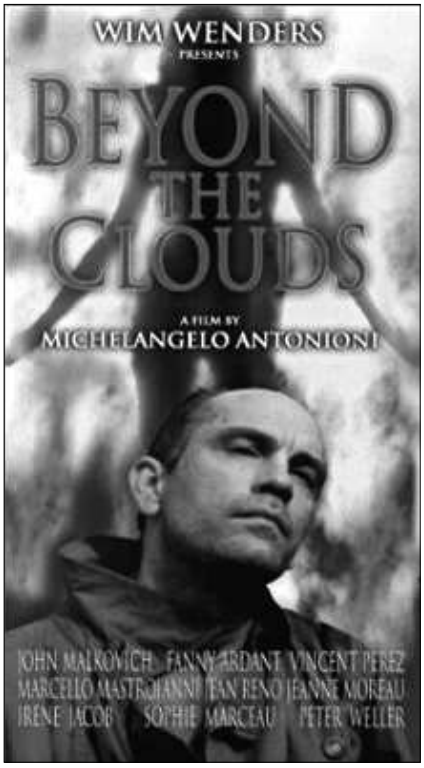
EKPHRASIS, 1/2009
Integrating Methodologies in Visual Culture Research
pp. 84-89

Introduction

The film made in 1995 by Michelangelo Antonioni came to existence in collaboration with Wim Wenders and became one of those works that retrospect an extremely long lifework. So, it is not surprising – and knowing Antonioni's films it's even less surprising – that the reflexivity of the film can be perceptible in multiple ways. The frame story directed by Wenders presents the film director (the alter-ego of Antonioini, played by John Malkovich) who is knocking about the world, looking for inspiration, and the episodes visualize his real or imaginary experiences. These are made from Antonioni's volume of short stories published in 1983.

1. Direct reflexivity

The direct reflextivity of the film is a result of the subject: although it is not about the physical way of making a film,



like many other famous works, but about the mental process of it. The film starts with the monologue of the director, flying on a plain "beyond the clouds" between two shootings, and he confesses that in some way he always continues an ended film with the one that he begins. We also can see this in Antonioni's works; for example *The Night* (*La notte*, 1961) ends with the dialogue of a couple, and his next film, *The Eclipse* (*L'Eclisse*, 1962) begins with the end of a dialogue between a couple, just as we were over the action of *The Night*.

Returning to the reflexivity of *Beyond the Clouds,* there is an other form of it, realized by allegories of the film(making). One of these allegories is photography: the director tells how much he likes photographing the surface of different things, blowing them up, because this way he can discover the real essence of the world around him. This idea is familiar from an other film of Antonioni (*Blowup,* 1966), which is raising a whole story – almost a whole crime – from the fact that, from different images put together, it can result some other different meanings (what is actually the basic point of filmmaking).

In this film, we are following the main character (the film director) while he's hanging around, shooting pictures, hearing a story from his friend, seeing a guy looking back on a window and mixing all these together in his mind until it becomes a story. And then we can follow the stories themselves, as he imagined them, in different episodes. The first one is about an unfulfilled love between a businessman and a teacher country-girl, who meet in a little pension out of the town. But the man leaves the woman, before anything can happen. After two years they accidentally meat again, and, even if they fall in love with each other, they don't establish a relationship, and we don't find out the reason of it. At the end of this episode appears the director, who travels to France to collect different characters. There he meets a girl (Sophie Marceau), who killed her father with 17 cuts. He starts to create the film about her in his mind, but, the experience is so personal, that he can't resist and leaves the country. In the train he hears the woman next to him telling in the phone: "don't look for me anymore" and

then we recognize the origin of the story seen before, inspired by this sentence. It is about two couples, who's destinies interweave in an interesting way. In some cases (like in this one) the explanation of the story's source is presented only after the respective episode, so we find out about that moment in the director's life that inspired the story as a follow-up.

After he leaves France, the director goes to an exhibition, where he tries to imitate a Cézanne self-portrait with his body. This moment takes us to the most famous scene of the film which suggests a few questions about the relationship of film and painting, and about the ars poetics of the creator. This episode is directed by Wim Wenders and Marcello Mastroiani with Jeanne Moreau are acting in it, the couple that played the main role in Antonioini's *The Night* (1960). In this scene, Mastroiani is making the reproduction of a Cézanne painting after the original, but a little bit changed landscape. Moreau puts the question why is copying needed, why isn't a photo of the landscape or an exact reproduction of the painting enough, and she gets the answer, that everybody who is copying a great artist has the chance to find the exact touch, and this gives more satisfaction than any of his own strokes. In this part painting becomes the allegory of film, because it suggests the problem of turning reality into images[1]. At the same time it expresses Wenders' respect for Antonioni: while copying him, Wenders tries to find the real touch of Antonioni.

In the exhibition room, where the director is looking around, there is an other boy, who becomes the protagonist of the next episode. He goes out on the street and starts to follow a girl who is going to church. After the ceremony is over, he takes the girl home, but he finds out that the next day she is going to the monastery. The boy remains alone on the dark street, where the director appears again and he ends the film with another monologue. In this epilogue, he tells that the directors are always looking for new expression forms of the film and try to identify new feelings, because they can't live in their old films. That's why they are always roaming, for the sake of the new films. While he told in the prologue that he tries to discover the things' real essence, now he strikes out that beyond every single event there is another event closer to reality, and so on to the infinite, to the real face of things that can't be seen by human being.

Beside the theme, direct reflexivity can be marked in the monologues of the main character-narrator: in the frame story, everything is selected and explained by the subjective filter of the film's director[2]. On the other hand, the episodes' narration is transparent. Compared to the reality of the director-

1 But in this case painting is only a pretext for talking about some questions of film-making (Pethő 2003. 196).

2 Kövesdy Gábor writes more about this kind of reflexivity (Filmvilág 1996. 10).

character (which is in the same time the reality of the film), the episode-characters appear as fiction. This way, fiction and reality are intersected: both elements are moving in the same time, in the same place. Another interesting aspect of this relation is the predestination of different characters. While the director's hanging around is completely incidental, the episode-character's destiny is very well defined[3]. This is understandable, as long as they are the creatures of the director's mind, they don't even pretend to be reality. Their creator is among them all the time to remind us that they are only the result of his imagination. Sometimes he even explains or finishes their story with his own words, but sometimes we can find him only in a very little detail. For instance, in the episodes of the two couples, during a dialogue between man and woman we can hear the sound of a plain. This can be explained like the presence of the director, as a creator beyond the clouds, who is deciding about the faith of the characters right that moment, on his plain-trip.

2. Indirect reflexivity

Indirect reflexivity is generally in those narrative techniques, which keep the spectator from identifying with the world of the film by pointing out the artificial nature of it. First of all, the episodic structure of the film results that the continuity of the narration is broken all the time. In our case this is accentuated by the fact that the frame story and the episodes are contradictory in more aspects.

Another form of indirect reflexivity is reference or citation of (others, or the author's himself) famous films. In the episode of the two couples there is a scene with a man and a woman, going up with the elevator in a huge building, with the image of the city underneath. This reminds to Antonioni's *The Night,* which begins in a similar way, only that there the elevator is going down. The image is faded into another one of the elevator, without the man the woman, so the effect is that they are simply disappearing from the picture. This motive of emptiness is returning later, when the husband clears out the house. In both films, the emptiness of the relationship is suggested by all these elements, and the motive of missing, of emptiness and disappearing is very familiar in Antonioni's whole oeuvre[4]. Later, a scene begins with the rescue of a girl who wants to suicide on the rails. This also remind of an earlier film of Antonioni, *The Girlfriends* (*Le amiche*, 1955), which is framed by the suicide attempt of a woman.

---

3 Although this is not characteristic of Antonioni: his complete lifework from *The Cry* (*Il Grido*, 1957) to the *Identification of a Woman* (*Identificazione di una donna*, 1982) is based on unpredictable actions.

4 He revolutionizes filmmaking with *The Adventure* (*L'avventura*, 1960), where a girls is disappearing, and the theme of the film is her missing, not the searching of her.

There are references of other's films too, in the last episode the characters find themselves in the middle of a demonstration on the street and this recalls the atmosphere of Fellini's films (*The White Sheik*, 1952, *The Road*, 1954, *Nights of Cabiria*, 1957). It is similar how the characters mix with the loud, enthusiastic people, who seem to come from nowhere and disappear as they've appeared. This is usually symbolizing the person's estrangement, and in this film maybe the divergence from the world of the girl who is going to the monastery.

There are some other indirect reflexive techniques in the film which don't refer to a particular case, but they are characteristic to Antonioni's works in general. One of these is the long shot[5]. The place where the characters meat in the first episode is shot in the way that the arches of a building give perspective for the image. The boy and the girl move in this perspective, while the arches (which are continuously repeated frames as well) give a strong rhythm for the picture. At the girl's place people walk into the picture in the depth and walk through, to the foreground. Compared to this, in the last episode people are walking to the background, where the church is. The girl who killed her father sits in the room and we can see the director who comes to say goodbye through the window. These images inside other images and "live mirrors"[6] are very characteristic to Antonioni: we can see many faces, dialogues through windows or doors, people's meeting mirrored in windows, kisses through glass-walls, human bodies cut by the frame of windows, just like in many other films of him. This mode of presenting the characters has a dehumanizing effect, because they become simple elements of images[7].

These are formal reflexive techniques, and the motion of the camera also belongs to them. As we are used to the classic way of filming an action, where the camera is following the characters, in Antonioni's films it's very usual that the camera lives his own life. In most cases it doesn't represent anyone's point of view; it is impersonal, indefinable, and its unmotivated movements point the attention to the mechanism of filmmaking. So, it breaks the illusion of watching the story, in a reflexive way.

Sometimes the colors are also catching the attention: there are mostly washed-out colors in the film and that's why some of the very high colors and combinations have a strange effect: the green wall with the red top of the girl, the blue room and

5 The perspective of the image is very deep and instead of montage the characters are acting in different point of the space, in the same time.

6 Live mirror is also the imitation of the Cézanne self-portrait at the exhibition.

7 This is also confirmed by the picture of the wife, broken into pieces by the husband and filmed from a very interesting perspective (between the legs of the husband and the new lodger girl.

the red clothes, but also the girl who is dressed all in white in the white house[8].

The way of using language in a film can also be a technique of reflexivity, if it is not natural and authentic. For example, in the first episode the characters are talking an academic language, as they were just implements of expressing the ideas of the director. They are talking about sounds, noises, the sunset, life in the cities, love, communication without words and the power of talking, even about some abstract notions, like the smell of words. The girl from the last episode evolves that we should kill our thoughts, we should separate from our body because it has too many necessities. She tells that we should renounce the little pleasures and we would be calmer. When she talks about the people's general displeasure, the boy asks a woman on the street if she is happy. The answer is: "Don't be ridiculous." The fact that they break their discussion and ask a stranger eggs the spectator to put the question for him/herslef, and this is similar to those cases, when the persons from the film ring out to the viewers, breaking the continuity of their text and of their own world.

Afterword

Maybe some of the explications seem to be forced and artificial, but usually, there is never anything in a film by coincidence, especially not in Antonioni's films. And besides the meaning of a film comes into existence by interpretation, so for every single viewer his/her own associations are interesting. I consider the film *Beyond the Clouds* a reflexive work in many points, which contains a lot of forms of direct and indirect reflexivity that can be found in Antonioni's whole lifework. The narrative techniques, and the themes brought on remind his earlier films, so *Beyond the Clouds* can be considered a retrospective film, which sums Antonioni's oeuvre.

Bibliography

WENDERS, Wim, 1996 Időm Antonionival (My time with Antonioni). *Filmvilág* 9: 13-19.

PETHŐ, Ágnes, 2003 *Múzsák tükre. Az intermedialitás és az önreflexió poétikája a filmben* (Mirror of Muses. The Poetics of Intermediation and Reflection in Films). M. Ciuc, Pro-Print, 194-196.

KÖVESDY, Gábor, 1996 Az elveszett bizonytalanság (The Lost Suspense). *Filmvilág* 9: 10-13.

8 In the *Red Desert* (1964) Giulianna's green top and red hair also catches the eye in the dull picture, and other characters of Antonioni are often wearing white, like Vittoria in *The Eclipse*.